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SOME ASPECTS OF MODERN MUSIC

By W. H. HADOW

WHEN the critic is young he regards every new movement as a sacred cause to be defended, and every man who stands on the old ways as an adversary to be challenged and overthrown. When he grows older he begins to find reason for modifying both these opinions. The claims of novelty if not less attractive become less urgent. Like Browning's Ogniben he has "seen three and twenty leaders of revolts" and the appearance of a four and twentieth although it rouses him to keen interest no longer thrills him with the sense of adventure. He has exchanged the arena for the laboratory, he has come to see that there are many aspects of truth and that they are all worth studying; he finds himself in sympathy with all forms of original expression, and holds that the only unpardonable sins are imposture and pretentiousness.

It may be said at once that the advantage is not all on the side of age. The quieter temper and the broader outlook are in part compensated by a less quick intelligence and a less ready enthusiasm. A man in middle-life has already fallen to some extent under the dominion of use and custom, his experience has moulded his character in certain directions, his early preferences have tended to harden and stereotype: the very forces that are maturing his judgment are taking their revenge by blunting his sensibility. Not that art means less to him; in many ways it means a great deal more, but the meaning is different, and in the fact of that difference something has been lost. Many of us can remember that stab of physical pleasure with which we first heard the opening of Beethoven's Violin Concerto, or of Bach's B minor Mass or of the second act of *Tristan*. Much of the new music is charming and admirable and intensely interesting, but it does not reproduce for us these supreme moments of delight.

Hence there is a real difficulty in discussing a phase of art which is making its appeal primarily to a younger generation. And the difficulty is increased by the extreme rapidity with which the language and idiom of music have altered during the last twenty years. To this it may be doubted whether the whole

history of the art can furnish a parallel. We have learned that the Florentine Revolution is a historical myth, and that the first "opera" followed traditions which had been steadily growing for more than a century. Bach's equal temperament gave a new direction to music, but the splendid harmonic audacity with which he used it had little or no influence on composition until fifty years after his death. Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, are not so far from each other as the music of 1880 from that of 1914. The Romantic movement was in many ways frankly conservative, and Brahms with greater genius followed it on the conservative side. Wagner broke down the conventions of drama and gave music a new emotional content, but the considerable changes of idiom which this entailed never really crossed the border into a new language. At the present day it appears as if the whole problem was being restated; as if the very principles of the art were called in question; as if its vocabulary were being written afresh and its most vital distinctions dismissed as obsolete. The first thing then is to enquire whether this is indeed the case, and whether if so an art of equal or greater value can be raised on the new foundation.

Here we are met by two rather disheartening obstacles. One of the besetting sins of the present age is its habit of intellectual slovenliness. Everybody wants to be in the movement, everybody is half-educated, there are abundant articles and little handbooks from which you can get up enough for dinner conversation, and with that lowly ideal many men seem to be satisfied. It is not easy to discuss recent painting with people who believe that Futurism and Post Impressionism are the same thing; or to discuss recent music with people who ask you "if you like such composers as Strauss and Debussy." Criticism is lost in a prevalent fog through which you can hear nothing but the megaphone and see nothing but the electric light. The advertiser strains his voice to the furthest breaking point and the journalist encourages him with shouting, every opinion is expressed in superlatives, partly to conceal ignorance and partly to attract attention, every shanty is a Saloon and every inn a Palace, guessing riddles is called a Tournament and killing flies a Crusade: in all this general welter it is not surprising that distinctions are forgotten, that shades of meaning are confused and that the power of discrimination is becoming atrophied by disuse. We have many excellent qualities at the present day but we are losing our sense of scholarship.

The second obstacle, which is, I believe, complementary to the first, is the extreme complexity of much contemporary music. For

instance, I am told that Schönberg's "Gurre Lieder" is a fine work, and so far as I can make it out I am ready to endorse this opinion. But it is written for five solo voices, besides a "Sprecher," for two choruses of eight and twelve voices respectively, and for a band which contains one hundred and fourteen orchestral parts. In order to publish it at all it has to be engraved, not printed, on an enormous sheet of paper with notes the size of pin points, directions which are almost unreadable, and ledger lines which sometimes require a magnifying glass. The style is that of advanced modern polyphony in which every part is real, no eye can possibly take in a whole page at once, and the chances of hearing the music may perhaps occur twice in a lifetime.

No doubt this is an extreme case, but it is not so extreme as to be outside fair criticism, and it is not unfair to urge that there must be something wrong with a work which, in aiming at its effect, is obliged to use such a suicidal prodigality of means. In the seventeenth century a learned Jesuit named Athanasius Kircher published a treatise on music and quoted as one of his examples a composition which he calls the *Nodus Salomonis*; a canon in 12,200,000 real parts, and capable of further extension. He does not regard it as practically possible in this world, though he expresses a pious hope that he may hear it in the next; its effect would be that of the chord of G major reiterated for ever and ever; and his account of it ends with the words "*haec ad mirificam Musicae combinationis vim demonstrandam sufficient.*"

Now with all deference we would submit that they can do nothing of the kind. We are not supplicating that music should be starved to the measure of our understanding, but maintaining that when it swells beyond a certain bulk it topples over. No doubt we must allow for the immense improvement in executive skill through which our modern orchestras can play passages which would have been impossible half a century ago: that is all to the good and we may take full advantage of it; but we are pressing executive skill beyond bounds when we use it for compositions which outstrip the capacity of the human ear. A great deal of the most elaborate modern music sounds as if it was all of the same colour: a rich blur of sound in which the different voices are hardly distinguishable, and from which, if current stories are true, they may sometimes absent themselves without detection. It is a far cry from this to the perfect transparence of Debussy's *Pelléas*, where every note tells, and where the full orchestra is used only once throughout the entire work.

We may be told that the ear will adapt itself to the new conditions as it has done many times before, and that the day will come when a symphonic poem of Schönberg is as straightforward as we now find a symphony of Mozart. To this it is a sufficient rejoinder that by that time men will be writing something else, and that these works are therefore in danger of withering before they grow up. But there is a more serious reason for disquietude. One of the clearest lessons in history is that when an artistic school begins to grow luxurious or self-conscious or erudite it is carrying in it the seeds of its own decadence. It was so with the Alexandrine school of Greek literature, it was so with the Roman poetry of the fourth century, it was so with the counterpoint of the middle ages, and precisely the same peril confronts the German school of which Schönberg is the greatest exponent. It seems to me not new but old, not adventurous but deliberate; its experiments appear to be the outcome of theories and formulas rather than the spontaneous impulse of artistic passion. With his early work, derived in some degree from Mahler and influenced in some degree by Strauss, we need not here be concerned: the centre of his mature work is best explained by his own treatise on *Harmony*. In this admirable book, written with style, distinction, and humour he sets forth very clearly certain artistic principles, of which two seem to be specially significant. In the first place he treats as stable harmonic masses effects which in the older composers were used only as *appoggiaturas* or as passing discords: holding in other words that anything which the ear can endure for a transitory instant it can equally endure as a point of rest.¹ This drives straight to the roots of the difference between concord and discord, and incidentally, I believe, accounts for many of the more serious experiments in modern harmony. In the second place he sets himself to construct a harmonic scheme on a system of superimposed fourths, now treated melodically, as in the opening theme of his 'Chamber symphony,' now raised in a towering structure across the whole of the great stave. Here he admits some limitations in practice, but it is difficult to see where the line is to be drawn for he quotes with approval a chord of eleven fourths which contains, in one or other of its forms, every semitone in the chromatic scale. No doubt the discord may be

¹In his *Harmonienlehre*, (p. 363), he quotes instances from Mozart and Bach, of which the former is an *appoggiatura*, the latter a dominant seventh cadence with passing notes which are regarded as vital parts of the harmony. I believe that a corollary from this will be the doctrine that if any notes in a chord be chromatically altered, this chord may resolve although the alteration had not taken place. And this will lead to a considerable extension of harmonic freedom.

veiled by differences of orchestral timbre, but even so it is sufficiently striking.¹

Now this is well enough in a treatise, but as composition it is surely the purest Alexandrinism. It is music made according to rule and measure, written by a man of unusual intellect and great receptivity who spoils everything by too obvious an adherence to method. We need not enquire whether the chords in themselves are ugly—there is probably no combination of notes which cannot in its proper context be made to sound beautiful: the primary fault is that they are written to order, that they remind one too much of Leibnitz's definition of music as "Arithmetic become self conscious." And if this is true, the harmony of Schönberg may become a most valuable store house and training school, but it will not itself lead far into the art of the future.

Yet when all is said one remembers the Schönberg of the early songs and the early chamber music and wonders whether after all this learned and professorial art may not be a transitional stage towards something larger and finer. The little pianoforte pieces, Op. 11 and Op. 19, give me the impression that they mean something to which I have not yet the clue. They start on a different hypothesis from other music, like Lobatchevski's geometry which started on the supposition that the triangle contained less than two right angles. And here we come to an alternative on which we may well be content to suspend judgment. If they are spontaneous they will live, and the world will come round to them, though they have little pleasure for us now. If, as I think at present, they are deliberate and artificial, they will go the way of all artificialities and will end their days in the dusty corners of the museum. But in either case the impression that they give me is that of the end of an old art, not the beginning of a new one.

Over against them, arrayed in all the panoply of youth, comes the vigorous and aggressive band of the Futurists. Here again the dispassionate student is confronted with a difficulty, for the very clever young men who surround Signor Marinetti are so peremptory that it is hardly possible to hear them without irritation. "They raise aloft," says one of them, "their blood-red banner." "They advance," as another tells us, "with their hearts full of fire, hatred and swiftness." They wage implacable war upon every known place of instruction. They demand the immediate demolition of every picture more than twenty years old. They write fierce critical volumes to prove the inutility of criticism, and declare

¹See also the chord from Schönberg's "Erwartung" quoted in the passage on Harmonised instrumentation. It contains thirteen different notes—two enharmonic.

in the most egotistical of manifestoes that they have destroyed the egotist from the earth. They have constructed a literature without verbs or particles, they have painted nightmares and built statues out of cigarettes and lamp-shades: there is no extravagance which they have not committed. And yet there is something in it.

The idea which animates Futurism may be summarised in two propositions. First, that all art is being strangled by tradition, that it is clogged and impeded by the inheritance of the past. We see through the eyes of our forefathers, we hear through their ears, we think through their brains; we have no longer the courage to face nature at first hand, but are dependent on the suggestions of our teachers. Therefore, say the Futurists, if art is to be saved alive, let us sweep away tradition altogether and start fresh. Second, that apart from the essential evils of pupilage, the past has no longer anything relevant to teach us. The conditions of life have so radically altered that they demand an entirely new form of artistic expression. We live in an age of swift movement and dynamic force, of radium and electricity, of the motor and the aeroplane, of a hundred appliances all concentrated on the rapid exercise of power: the characteristics of the new age are force and vigour and lusty youth, impatient of delay, scornful of opposition, annihilating time and space as it flies on its immediate purpose. What have we to do with the suave and leisurely art of the past, with its quiet thoughts and its passive gratifications, its long-drawn problem of style and its logical coherence of structure? The music of old time was an art of peace and luxury, we are for war '*seule hygiène du monde.*'¹

The conclusions which follow from these principles have been made familiar in more than one manifesto. There is to be no more academic instruction, but every man working out his own salvation in his own way: no more romance—love is too soft for the warrior: no more well-constructed art,—when the blood leaps high you have not time to think of style: no more restriction but undisputed liberty of utterance. Melody is to be regarded as a 'synthesis of harmony,' based on the chromatic scale as unit and wholly free in rhythm; the old symphonic structures are to go by the board and the form of each composition is to be 'generated by its own motive of passion'; Church music is to be abolished as impotent, and opera (in which the composer must be his own librettist) is to be treated as a symphonic poem where the singers have no pride of

¹Marinetti *Le Futurismus* ch. 5. p. 53. "Qui peut affirmer," he says on the preceding page "que le mot *homme* et le mot *lutteur* ne soient pas synonymes."

place but rank alongside the instruments of the orchestra. Lastly it is to be the function of the Futurist composer "to express the soul of factories and trains and steamships . . . and to wed to his central motive the dominion of the machine and the victorious reign of electricity."¹

It is plain that we have here much food for contemplation: it is equally plain that there is much with which we are prepared to agree. Every great artist has always stood for freedom, and if the claim is here more strident than usual, that may perhaps be explained by some circumstances of provocation. Again it is natural that art should express the ideals and emotions of its own time: its function is to interpret, not to recall, and in every advance of civilized man it has taken its place among the pioneers. But both these points require further consideration before we can understand their meaning. The freedom of the artist means immunity from prescriptive rule: the indefeasable right to see beauty in his own way and to express it in his own terms. But art is not something separate and distinct from human nature, it is an essential aspect of humanity itself; and one measure of the artist's genuineness is that what he sees now the world, through his interpretation, will come to see later. And because the artist is a man born of men his vision will not be out of relation to that which was seen by his fathers before him. He will speak parables, but he will not speak them in an unknown tongue. Hence any attempt to break violently with the past is foreign to the real nature of art. The sense of beauty may develop more rapidly in one period than another: it has developed with exceptional rapidity in our own generation: but in proportion as it is living it will draw sustenance from the roots of its mother earth.

Free rhythm, free harmony, free use of the chromatic scale, free treatment of structural forms;—all these are the colours on the artist's palette which he may employ as he will. It is not about these that there should be any contest but about the question what he does with them. Does he equally avoid monotony and incoherence, does he express noble feeling, does he use his medium with such reserve as to throw his light upon special points of colour, has he melody and passion and the power of climax? If so he may go where he pleases, secure that we are ready to follow him. The types of artistic beauty are not one but many and each type is inexhaustible.

A word should be added on the worship of Mechanism which seems to be an essential part of the Futurist creed. It is no doubt

¹Pratella, *Musica Futurista*, pp. 15-16.

intelligible that a group of men who derive their inspiration from power and swiftness should be attracted by the marvels of mechanical science and should even come, like the engineer in Mr. Wells' story, to attach religious significance to a dynamo. This exactly fits with the revolt from formal beauty which is at the other side of their minds and is liable to precisely the same danger. Force and speed are preeminent in their own sphere: to be made subjects of art they need to be transfigured and irradiated by something more than their own light. And the same insensibility which accepts them as artistic ideals is apparent in the poetry and the music which these men have offered as the first outcome of their school. Marinetti's poem on the Balkan war is extraordinarily vivid and direct: it carries the reader forward with almost the force of personal experience: but it is entirely without any delight except that of swift motion. Pratella's example of composition, printed at the end of *Musica Futurista*, has some vigorous and swinging rhythm; but there is little in it to arrest the attention, and the greater part of it seems to me either trivial or monotonous.¹ The territory which the Futurists claim may be theirs by right, but they have not yet shown that they can administer it.

Traditionalism closes a chapter, revolt attempts to tear the pages out of the book. A wiser and more progressive art recognises the value of what has been written and begins its new chapter at the point where the last concluded. Of this we have, in the music of the present day, many instances from many lands:—the native wood-notes of Sibelius, the delicate and tender art of Ravel, Stravinsky's melody and humour and amazing gift of orchestral colour;—all in their way breaking new ground, all taking their points of departure from past achievement. Among these is one man who may specially be taken as typical: an artist who as yet attempted few fields of composition but in those has shown remarkable genius and a rapid and continuous advance. Scriabine is still a young man, and of his published works, which have now passed the seventieth opus-number, more than half have been produced during the last six years. A large majority of them are written for pianoforte solo; among the others are a piano concerto (op. 20) three symphonies (op. 26, 29, 43) and two very striking symphonic poems of which "Prometheus" (op. 60) has done more than anything else to establish his reputation. It is worth adding that ten of his pianoforte works are sonatas and that the latest of these is op. 70.

¹It is fair to say that I am judging by the pianoforte score. But it is this which Pratella quotes as his illustration.

So far it would seem as though he were merely a 'conservative' musician, content to accept the traditional forms and little concerned with their extension or development. But when we study the music we find that the reverse is the case. In his hands the sonata widens and enlarges until it becomes a new means of expression. Each symphony is more adventurous than its predecessor, and the symphonic poems are triumphs of successful audacity. Here is no timid and laggard art: every step is planted firmly and every movement is onward. His early work shows traces of Chopin's influence, yet always with a distinctive note: by the time that he has reached op. 25, (a set of nine dainty mazurkas) the period of studentship is definitely over and from thence forward he speaks with his own voice. As his work proceeds it grown more sonorous, more impetuous, more passionate: the formal restraints fall away, not by violence but by natural expansion from within: it is music as free as thought and as vigorous as life, which has won strength through discipline, and liberty through reverence for law. Among technical points may be noted the variety and flexibility of his rhythm, the fulness and richness of his harmonisation, and his gradual acceptance of the chromatic scale as basis, an acceptance so frankly given in the end that two of his latest sonatas have no key-signature. But these speak only of the grammar and vocabulary of his art, they are the dry bones upon which he has breathed the spirit of romance. Amid the younger composers of Europe there is none whose present achievement holds out greater promise for the future.

A few years then, have sufficed to develop a genius which starts from Chopin and has already all the neologisms of music at its command. In its development the stages are as clearly traceable as in that of any other composer—not of course in unbroken line but in general trend and direction.¹ And this progress is the reaction of a vivid and powerful mind on resources and materials which had long been in preparation. Take for instance the use of the chromatic scale. As far back as 1840 Chopin was employing half-tones with a freedom which brought upon him the wrath of conservative critics: then came Liszt with his dream of a *genre omnitonique*, then a number of masters who helped each in his way to bring that dream nearer to realisation. Wagner treated the appoggiatura as no man had treated it

¹e. g. of the Pianoforte works, the Mazurkas (Op. 25), the Fantasie (Op. 28), the two Poèmes (Op. 32), the Preludes (Op. 35), the Poème Satanique (Op. 36), and the seventh and tenth sonatas. The first symphony (Op. 26) is more or less on customary lines, the third (Op. 43) is virtually a symphonic poem, and after that come *Le poème de l'extase* (Op. 54) and *Prometheus* (Op. 60).

before him, wove his orchestral texture out of a new and often chromatic polyphony, and made his actors follow as nearly as possible the cadences of the speaking voice. Dvořák showed wonderful ingenuity in the combination and succession of remote tonalities, and in one of his smaller works (*Poetische Stimmungsbilder* No. 12) tried the experiment of such continuous and rapid modulation that the music could bear no key-signature. Grieg devised a scheme of harmonic colour which unquestionably influenced Debussy on one side—César Franck another and richer scheme which influenced not only Debussy but all subsequent French music. Strauss in the first two numbers of “*Heldenleben*” broke down all distinctions together and treated all notes in the scale as equally related. Meanwhile the Russian composers from Moussorgsky onward were bringing their own solution of the problem; one can trace it in Cui, and still more in Rimsky-Korsakov, and so onward to the younger school of which Scriabine and Stravinsky are among the most conspicuous masters. There is no doubt that the whole texture of music has in this way been greatly enriched, its vocabulary widened, its possibility of expressing enlarged. But there are two attendant dangers. One that all this opulence and splendour may be gained at some expense of purity, and that the ear overcharged with sound may lose its nicety and cleanness of judgment: one that in employing for common use the whole range of musical language there may be nothing left for moments of emphasis. The effect of harmony depends more than anything else in music on its context: a dominant seventh in Mozart, an augmented sixth in Schubert may strike us as with incomparable pleasure because they stand as supreme points of colour in a phrase that has been specially toned down to prepare for them. Nowadays it is not unusual to see on the printed page an apparently recondite modulation which, when we hear it, leaves us cold because we are already surfeited. In other words one kind of climax,—that which comes from sheer reserve and reticence in colour—appears to be less at the disposal of modern music than it was at that of the great classics.

It is for this reason, among others, that design is becoming more and more dependent upon expression. The balance, held perfectly by Beethoven, is now swinging definitely over to the poetic side, and ‘sonate que veux-tu’ is no longer an intelligible question. This again is only the continuation of a process which has been going on ever since the beginning of the art: the work of every period has seemed formal to its successor and we are in this matter also the inheritors of past ages. But the insistence on

expression and even representation in music is now more urgent and more prevalent than it has ever been. Our favourite forms are dramas and ballets of action, songs in which melody is pushed to the point of declamation, symphonic poems and descriptive overtures; even our chamber-works are beginning to look from their window at the street or the landscape. Now it is a commonplace that all true music is expressive—the outcome of a vital impulse which speaks because it cannot keep silence. Music which has no emotion behind it is a mere academic puzzle: the merriest of Haydn's scherzos, the lightest rondo of Mozart has its own feeling as truly as the slow movement of the Choral symphony. But to make expression the sole measure of form is an artistic blunder. For one thing, if it is to build a climax wholly out of emotion it is in danger of piling Pelion upon Ossa until it culminates in mere wildness and extravagance: for another if it entirely disregards formal beauty it will soon dispense with beauty of sound and replace the orchestra, as indeed Signor Marinetti has already done, by a babel of noise-machines. And for those of us who think that the first business of music is to be beautiful these extremes are a little bewildering. By all means, we say, carry your emotion as far as is consistent with loveliness, by all means 'let the idea create its own form' provided that the form be intelligible. But mere intensity is not sufficient in itself—otherwise the most artistic things in the world would be blind rage and inarticulate passion. It is not only that if we abrogate objective law we give up all hopes of a standard and place ourselves at the mercy of any young gentleman who crashes his fist on the piano and calls that a 'Mood' or an 'Impression.' Even if the feeling be genuine it is but the raw material of art, and the finished work must be such as gives us joy in the hearing.

At all times there have been pedants who would check advance and hot-headed revolutionaries who would misdirect it. At all times there have been musicians who sang for profit and musicians who sang for popularity and musicians who, like Dryden's rustic:—

Whistled as they went for want of thought.

But at all times and at the present no less than any, there have been artists of high aim and noble purpose who recognise that the greatest genius is he to whom the world means most, and that if a man is strong enough to create he is also receptive enough to learn. The present age is neither exceptional nor anomalous. Some of the new music is the conscious readjustment

of old materials—the sounds are strange but they have no fresh idea to convey. Some is merely the trick of a mischievous child who will learn better when he grows up: some the natural but passing anger of a revolt against prettiness or pedantry. And through all these the great stream of music continues its appointed course, not unconscious of the swirls and eddies at the bank-sides, but recognising that some of them are flowing backward, and some are spinning round and round, and yet all will ultimately find their way into the volume of its waters. In art the good that men do lives after them and all true effort is absorbed in a common immortality.